POSTFLIGHT PROCEDURES

The flight isn't over until the airplane is parked and tied down

By Dave Wilkerson

And so, you've done it! This flight, you've made every maneuver a resounding success &mdash you've had no other flight as smooth or as well planned. Plus, you chose a great day for your checkride. You need only park and secure your airplane while awaiting that magic sentence that begins with "Congratulations...." Probably you are right to exult, but while the odds favor you at this point, rejoicing may still be premature. Even the most thrilling and successful flights end with the unexciting task of parking and securing. This means that you must learn and apply certain postflight inspection considerations. And oh, yes &mdash your examiner must observe you accomplish them.

The Federal Aviation Administration collects statistics on nearly every imaginable aspect of how pilots use or abuse airplanes. Statistics reliably reveal that traditionally neglected areas like postflight procedures hold hidden and significant threats for the unwary. For this reason, both the private and commercial pilot Practical Test Standards (PTS) include Area of Operation XI (Area of Operation XII for private pilot), titled "Postflight Procedures."

Some examiners test at length their applicants' aircraft parking and securing knowledge during the oral exam. To an examiner, there is far more to parking and securing than simply pulling the mixture control to idle cutoff and flipping the master switch off. There is applicant knowledge of hand signals, which appear in the Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM). You should be familiar with these when you take your checkride. (Actually, you should also be aware of them when you fly a cross-country.)

You already know that safety is a vital pilot concern during rollout. Part of our universal longing for smoothness involves safety, but our overwhelming satisfaction from a velvety landing can smother that safety orientation during the rollout. An after-landing rollout demands prudence and care. The FAA's expectation that the pilots it certificates review their after-landing checklists after bringing their airplanes to a full stop clear of the active runway has had detractors. Most examiners have heard pilots chide them for demanding a practice ignored in "the real world." Some examiners have succumbed to shortcutting the after-landing check by ignoring a disqualifying disregard for checklist use at this point. We should not.

After-landing checklist use is vital for a number of reasons. Some airplane equipment is to be used only in flight and never on the ground. The reasons may vary, but your examiner's concern centers on your following the manufacturer recommendations or operator's approved procedures via the operator's printed checklist. Should neither of these exist, your examiner judges your performance based on the procedures listed in the Airplane Flying Handbook, the Pilot's Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge, or the AIM. During rollout and the subsequent after-landing check, collision avoidance remains crucial.

Too often have examiners heard: "I've done this so many times I don't need to use the checklist." While this is a frequent conclusion for an undisciplined mind, the moment a student/ flight instructor team allows this practice to take root, it germinates the seed of some future accident. You may notice that Task A of this area of operation end with "Completes appropriate checklist." Based on much study and information (statistics again), the FAA knows checklist use to be fundamental to intelligent practice, and also where over-reliance on it can distract. As you prepare for your practical test, reinforce your checklist habit at the appropriate phases.

As useful as they are, after-landing checklists can only cover the routine. Life diverges from that far more than checklists can cover. For example, few checklists instruct pilots to inspect their intended tie-down spot for foreign objects or debris that could present a hazard to the aircraft or nearby people or property. Still, that absence from the printed checklist does not justify an applicant taxiing over, for example, a seemingly empty plastic beverage bottle lounging just where one needs to park. (Yes, applicants have suffered debris prop-strikes on their otherwise successful checkrides.)

Parking should be a routine procedure, but surprises arise even here. Pilots need to consider the aircraft's next flight as they park and shut down. Should the next pilot's starting technique be more tachometer-Neanderthal than yours, will he blast sand, pebbles, or debris into people or property if you park carelessly? If tiedowns are questionable, is the airplane parked into the existing or forecast wind? If the tiedowns inspire confidence, can you tie an effective knot?

The best and worst of 2012

Pilots whose only tiedown experience involved hooks and chains, or slip friction devices on ropes, tend to create unbelievable knots in plain ropes. Is the nosewheel straight? Having to apply full power simply to taxi out of parking because the nosewheel is canted to one side is more than mere annoyance; it is dangerous. The pilot parking an airplane leaves his mark by how he parks.

Examiners continue to evaluate even after the propeller shakes to a halt and the engine clinks and tinkles back to ambient temperature. Our thoughts include questions like: Did the aircraft have any mechanical problems that need attention before the next flight? Did the applicant advise maintenance? Failure to consider these factors can create annoyance for the next aircrew, or become an anonymous link on disaster's chain. The examiner who, on shutdown, exits the airplane with a flip, "I'll see you inside," ignores part of his job, and it is typically the innocent who pay the bill. Conventional wisdom holds that life offers only one opportunity to make a favorable first impression. During your checkride, your parking and securing habits create your only opportunity to make a final impact upon someone whom you truly wish to impress.

Pilots should echo the Dutch painter who said, "God is in the details." We occasionally encounter the applicant who, at flight's start and between landings, consciously and correctly positions the flight controls for crosswinds, only to hold them neutral while taxiing to parking in a strengthening wind at flight's end. We who have been long involved in aviation education understand that desired behaviors need reinforcement from time to time, especially when we believe with certainty that our students have permanently absorbed the desired traits. Part of that reinforcement battle includes the need to overcome that false feeling that a flight is complete simply because the airplane is back on the ground. To borrow a famous phrase, "It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings" &mdash or at least until the airplane is tied down and we walk away happily humming.

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